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CONVERSATIONS, DIALOG AND DELIBERATION: LEADERS MOVING TOWARDS THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF SCHOOL REFORM

In the long tradition of conversation, deliberation and dialog around education many critical questions are connected with its development, change and maintenance. All participants in the discussion usually experience sensations arising from being able to see the importance of the issues discussed and, at the same time, suffering from a significant lack of ability to create simple, and easy to implement solutions. The participants in the conference which generated the products shared in this journal followed the beaten path. Again we agreed on the importance of education and we could not offer ready to use solutions, but, through deep conversation and verbal inquiry, we clearly understood the connections between school (and we hope education that is secured inside it) and the external world. We decided that there are three critical concepts possible to extract from our presentations and arguments, essential to the whole discussion about schools. First: democracy (or rather conditions of operating for democratic society, thereby enabling a democratic education), the second concept: cooperation and communication (or rather conditions that create a framework for all

¹ This work emerged over the course of the conference, *Re/forming Education: Linking Schools, Universities and Communities for Democratic School Reform*. During sessions held as part of the conference, participants were asked to engage in dialog about the issues presented. These dialog sessions, held most often in small groups, included note taking and group writing. As a result, this piece is the product of the multiple voices (Superintendent, Principal, Professor, Non-governmental Organizations) present during the conference. While the piece in no way reflects the complete thoughts of one individual, it does share some of the essence of the deliberation that occurred.

our activities) and finally, the third: systemic change (or rather the dilemma of whether it is possible or not).

Those three concepts create a space for deliberation about numerous factors shaping education and democratization of school reform. Among them there is a lot of room for planning, designing, dreaming, arguing, talking and agreeing on the most critical issues that hopefully serve to re/form education.

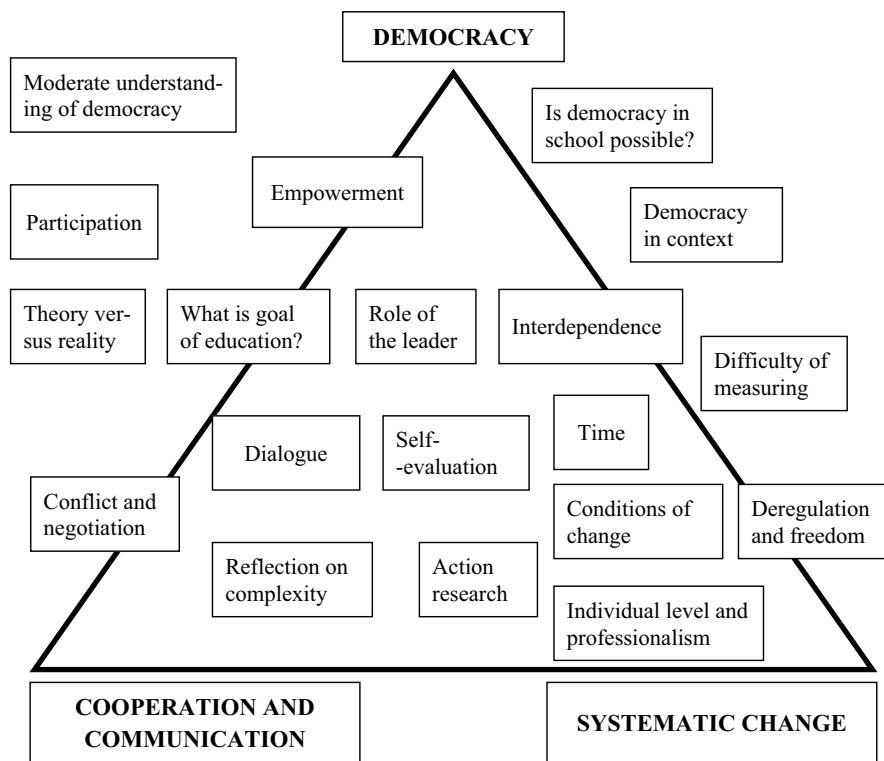


Fig 1. Educational Discourse: issues and three critical concepts

Democracy

As an ill-defined process democracy is often viewed as too complex and unmanageable for the world of education. Some argue that schools need to be managed, managed in the sense of one person giving direction and others following. Or do they? If one role for schools in democratic societies is to help prepare young people for active life, then schools need to become more democratic in order to pass on a democratic ethos.

Democracy as a political philosophy is by most examples, limited. That is, not all decisions are those of the government, in fact many of the finest demo-

cratic documents are those that deny the government the right to do something, to make choices, to set directions and instead insist that it is the work of the people. Within democratic society education has served many purposes. These purposes for educating members of society act as a preface for conceptualizing democratic school reform/democratic schooling. In the states, the history of schooling is marked by attempts to use schools to “Americanize” immigrants, create a docile workforce, and reinforce dominant cultural values. It has also, at times, been seen as a vehicle for change and liberation. During this conference we clearly operated on the side of liberation, empowerment, and enhanced positive freedom. That being said, we adopt a particular stance toward the notion of democracy and see democratic practice, actively working together across our areas of difference, as the primary mode of operation for both schooling itself and for school reform.

School reform to be successful needs all stakeholders to bring their resources, voice and active participation to the task. Democratic school reform is not democracy in its limited form. Democratic school reform demands that, despite our existence in an educational context full of undemocratic actions, those that care about the quality of schooling and the future democratic nature of society must step out and into the struggle that is the deliberation around the purpose, goals, and evaluation of schooling.

Standards in education are one example. They can be the product of democratic processes or the latest face of centralized control, depending on how standards were set. Was there involvement, were representatives at some point engaged in debate about policies, directions, means? And are the decisions subject to change?

A second example is student and teacher involvement in the day to day curriculum decisions of their classrooms. How might that occur? Students and teachers can be involved in the selection of content worthy of study and the methodology that might be employed to engage in such critical inquiry. That involvement might start very small with the youngest participants in the school environment but should increase with age. With the understanding that there is a set of standards (educational standards) that have been embraced by the wider society and serve as markers of achievement, road maps for the multiple pieces those outside of school expect to see.

Is Democracy Possible in Education?

Is democracy in education possible? It depends on the way democracy is defined. At different levels of education it may have a different meaning. From the perspective of elementary and middle school the immediate goal of education is obligatory (defined by educational standards); however, the ways of achieving it may vary depending on individual preferences, value hierarchies, and other individual and/or social factors. The whole school community (students, parents, and teachers) should have a chance to express their opinions and preferences in order to develop the sense of responsibility for the process of learning and teaching. The school system should assure that the voice of each member of the community is taken into consideration during decision making (methods, curricula, manuals, projects, class tutoring).

The best of actions in a school reflect the democratic process and represent the means by which societies work to improve themselves. As part of the democratic process schools are encouraged to engage in steps that include problem identification, data gathering, proposing solutions, and then reflection. But even this process holds dangers. If done in non-democratic environments the process can look democratic but be set in such a way as to deny stakeholders the opportunity for full voice and participation.

However, one of the things we are forced to reflect on as we think about the possibilities of democracy in education is the over individualistic notion of democracy. In the American context de Tocqueville told us again and again of the enormous individualism present in the early American society. This is seen by some as opposed to or even antithetical to the community common good. Metaphorical questions might be asked: are we all in the same car heading down the highway, bound for glory and only limited by our fears? Or are we on a bus with many seats, filled with different sounds and music, struggling to determine what stop we are looking for, what destination suits us. Both metaphors, communal busses versus separate cars, force us to consider the idea that the co-construction of democracy is a given. It, democracy, does not simply exist. We are forced to think about how we develop it, live within it and what modes of cooperation we seek to employ.

Schools face similar issues. They might try for a year to get different social service agencies to work within the schools, for the common good. But even with the ultimate goals that are served by working together, everyone is afraid of loosing their funding, afraid of protecting their turf. But what would happen if they just went in and entered into discussions across institutional boundaries and worked to make the lives of students better? Or what if they walked away because one side or the other did not want to be there? Would the outcomes be different for society?

At a larger level, a national level, there needs to be an ongoing discussion that defines what we mean by democracy and what is implied as a result. Will we know the democratic choices when we are confronted with them? Will we know the common good when it is laid out in front of us? Or are we destined to work only in self-interest and in the self-interest of the institutions of which we are a part? Again, we come back not only to a conceptual question, but also a question of the purpose for education.

Cooperation and Communication

Learning organizations are engaged in training and self-evaluation. They are interdependent and always headed towards points of conflict. Perhaps, though, the conception and notion of interdependence holds out the most promise as we conceptualize democratic school reform efforts. In the society around us we do not see recognition for the need for interdependence or recognize interdependence as an approach to our problems.

We don't even recognize the need for schools to be varied – the issue about similarity or difference is one of continual attempts at standardization. But communities are different and have different needs. While every community has the right to expect the most of their sons and daughters, the paths to reaching this goal are, by necessity, different. As a result schools need to look different, feel different in the way they approach students and families. In the end they may all reach some minimum level of common curriculum expectation, but schools must meet the needs of their community. Schools must contribute to the advancement of the community if they are to fulfill their role in democratic societies.

This conception of similarity and difference also serves to define the manner in which schools, universities and non-governmental organizations might come to contribute to democratic school reform. Each institution has different needs, different areas of expertise, and different interests. Yet, each can gain something from their involvement in the improvement of educational opportunities for schools and the teachers and students who inhabit them.

One key process in building interdependence as a key element of democratic school reform is teamwork. Team work should be promoted in school as the basic means of work for all categories of school community members (students, teachers, and parents). Networking both internal (among teams functioning in the school) and external (between schools, institutions, parents, authorities, and others) should be promoted. That requires high levels of communication skills and good understanding of the needs and goals of others. It needs to be done on regular basis: planned, organized, led, and controlled; that means it's a long term task that should be performed systematically and continuously (not just through special actions).

Complexity and diversity are the hallmarks of the relationships possible between schools, universities and non-governmental organizations. How we interact given that diversity is critical – the process of interacting may be easier to agree upon than the actual needs and interests we each hold. A process of interaction based on recognizing interdependence may be a productive way to approach the problem of democratic action. In this complex, diverse situation it is important that all actors are identified and given space to speak.

Roles for Leaders

Given the above, what does this suggest for the role of leaders? First, the leader is not just one person – everybody is a leader. Different times and different problems open spaces for different leaders. Each must be prepared to take the lead – responsibility must be shared by each member of the group. Schools must work towards the concept of mutual accountability. This seems to suggest that we are “leading with” rather than “leading over.”

For students we see multiple impacts. Students represent one group of actors. As such, they must be given the opportunity to lead and to speak for themselves. By participating in this process they will learn responsibility and become more involved. For teachers the roles implied by movement towards more democratic

forms of school reform are significant professional development that is self-directed, significant involvement in decision-making bodies in the school and community and a willingness to be self-reflective. For universities, similar roles are implied. Faculty and staff in universities must see, as part of their role, significant professional development, significant involvement in decision-making bodies and a willingness to be self-reflective. While universities must continue their research and knowledge construction, they are more likely to come to real world conclusions when working in concert with real world actors. In schools and education that means researching in partnership with schools, teachers and students. It is also means focusing on the questions that arise from the day to day life of a school – why are their different levels of success? What teaching strategies appear to be working in this community? How might teachers both provide research partners and engage in their own action research as a means of reflection?

Contextual Systemic Decisions

As a result of our deliberations we are left with significant pessimism about schooling and education in general. After years of neo-liberalist moves towards both standardization and accountability we are left with piles of tests, piles of reports and piles of data, all rarely used in a productive manner, even when well intended. Perhaps the answer is real deregulation, defined as getting rid of the majority of legal regulations. As a result we would leave decisions to teachers; they know what to do. Set clear expectations and then let teachers work to decide how to best get all of the students in their context and communities to at least that level.

Perhaps schools are inherently non-democratic places. For example, why does the state require everyone to attend school until they are 16 or 18 – most people would not if they didn't have to. School is seen as an alienating place, one that does not necessarily look out for the best interests of those who work within its walls or sit in its desks. Should we even go so far as to push to get rid of school and replace the work that goes on within its walls with democratic educational institutions?

We have heard of examples that meet our goal for democratic school reform and schooling itself. The examples look like the description of “social” or “charter” schools that exist in some parts of Poland and discussed in often glowing terms. These schools can be, in some instances, schools that meet the goals already in place: parental involvement, competent teachers, clearly educated and confident, students – involved in the decision making process and using the teacher as a guide. That such schools exist is perhaps even more frustrating. But why do we as a society only let a select few of our students experience these kinds of quality educational environments? Their existence means it is possible and that our choices as a society, choices about school size, classroom teaching

practices, licensure of teachers, expectations for parent involvement, and student standards all might be for good or bad.

Schools can be created that focus on the real problems in their community, that engage students in participation in real life. And since we know such schools are possible what are we to do? What roles might universities, non-governmental organizations and schools play together? How might they work to meet their own self-interest and yet/thereby improve the democratic life of schooling?

The roles for universities in achieving these schools can be seen in the actions they can take today. They can work to prepare educated teachers. They can work to engage the community in problem identification and solution proposing. Universities have as a part of their role (not all) the engagement of their students in practical application and hands on learning about the subjects they are supposed to be studying – project-based, contextual, critical. When you talk about poverty go look at it in the community, so when students talk about these constructs they have a chance to engage and see how it looks and what it feels like. And as solutions are developed they need to be reported back to the community.

Are schools doing the bidding of the state, recreating institutions and their norms? Or are they working to break open possibilities for students, teachers, and communities? Would they be the first institutions shut down if some group hoped to stall the progress of democratic thinking in society? Our sense is that the idea of public action is totally devoid in k-12 schools and universities. If we are going to create a stable, deep democratic society then this must be a point of change. And, again we come back to the purpose of education.

Schools and universities meet their role in democratic societies best when they define as their ultimate goal to promote, create and continue the process of democratizing society, focused on the health and well-being of the people – all the people. Again, by building decision-making structures, bringing various voices to the table from parents, the community, and even students, schools will be able to best judge when they are meeting the needs of their constituents.

On the other hand there must also be space for universities to continue to do what they have always done, look for new knowledge. Some projects involving schools, universities and non-governmental organizations cause concern. They are limited, time consuming and lead to little real change. We do not seek projects just for the sake of projects. There has to be space at the university for developing new knowledge, but there also has to be space to engage and produce knowledge in real situations.

While we understand the motivation behind the movement to impose standardized curricula and assessment standards for teachers, we view them as inadequate as a means of building and maintaining successful and democratic learning environments. Imposing projects from the central ministry on to individual schools is not only undemocratic, but also, almost always doomed to failure. We believe it is a good thing for education to take place in a de-centralized, fragmented, non-hierarchical atmosphere. Just as different topography demands the construction of different styles of buildings in Japan and Poland, local situations of schools demand unique learning environments. We do not concern ourselves

with talk of reforming the “education system” but instead care about the learning environment of individuals, groups and organizations.

The role of leaders then is not to sit in an office in the capitol and come up with new regulations for schools to follow, instead leaders must emerge in local situations and work with other local leaders to collect and share information and resources, deliberate and debate, build platforms and time for meaningful exchanges. Leaders must be mobile and thereby build relationships. This from the ground up version of leadership will open opportunities for meaningful student participation.

In this reality, universities, students, teachers work together using “action research” approaches, which importantly includes a process of self-evaluation as learning.

Conclusions

This paper is a work in progress; much like democracy; much like school reform. The definition of democratic school reform hasn’t really changed after two days of the conference and dialog. We would still define it as an ill-defined process of democratic actions that work to improve often too complex and unmanageable worlds of education. And yet we are left with no better solution. Schools without democracy – lack of student voices, no decision-making role for teachers, administrators with limited vision, will eventually fail to meet the needs of democratic communities. Some argue that schools need to be managed, managed in the sense of one person giving direction and others following. The examples are out there to prove this notion false. Strong school reform is democratic. It contains multiple processes designed to listen to and gather information from a variety of audiences. If one role for schools in democratic societies is to help prepare young people for active life, then schools need to become more democratic in order to pass on the crucial aspects of a democratic ethos.

The best way of creating reforms in schools? Schools, universities and non-governmental organizations each bringing their resources, unique qualities, different perspectives and even their own self-interest and then building projects that create a process of and a sense of interdependence. Democratic school reform is projects done in good creative partnerships, and those shouldn’t be structure-centered but goal/question-oriented. These projects are organized in a democratic way and establish space for dialogue. These projects contain multiple, well defined roles for partners. It is clear that over time change is possible. Universities and schools must work to impact change through partnership: knowledge, methods of research, shared governance. By breaking with our institutional strategies and routines we can create new institutional processes in support of democratic education.